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From Currency to Agency: Local Currencies vs. Colonial/ State Currencies in the Solomon Islands

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Abstract

Shell money composed of strings of shell beads have been widely used in island Melanesia as bride wealth, payment for compensation, medium for trade, and personal ornaments. Most production centers abandoned their manufactures since the introduction of colonial currencies in the region, and the Langalanga is the only group in the Solomon Islands today who continues to make shell money (*bata*) for regional circulation. This paper analyzes why Langalanga people persist in an economy based largely on shell money manufacture in contemporary Solomon Islands. How local currency is perceived and appropriated is highly related to the colonial/ state currencies in the area. This paper examines the entanglement between local currency and colonial/ state currency among the Langalanga, especially in comparison with the Kwaio in Malaita Province, Solomon Islands. According to David Akin's research, the local currency (*kofu*) in Kwaio becomes the symbol of cultural value and local agency against the penetration of outside world. However, the Langalanga took a different path in constructing their relationships with the state. Instead of restricting its flow within their own territory, the Langalanga produce more shell money and expand its circulation to a wider region as a way to maintain their identity and agency by actively participating in the formulation of new political and economic arena.